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ABSTRACT

A total of 25 parents who participated in the Head Start program provided testimony to the Silver Ribbon Panel of the National Head Start Parent Association in a hearing held in Phoenix, Arizona in 1989. Their stories tell of the problems they faced, the benefits of program participation to them and their children, and the nature of services the program provided. (RH)

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Twenty-five Voices Celebrating Twenty-five Years

taken from

Testimony presented to

The Silver Ribbon Panel

at

The National Head Start Parent Association

December 9, 1989

Phoenix, Arizona

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Parent 1

I was in the first year of Head Start. I even remember my teacher's name because Head Start made an impact on my life...not only when I started Head Start 25 years ago, but numerous times since then. When I was 13 my mother went to Head Start. As a teenager I was going through a lot of changes and my mom was going through changes too because I'm her oldest child. Well, she would go to Head Start and they would have the rap sessions, the parent sessions...My mother was able to open up and we formed a closer relationship and my mother became more involved which really helped.

Well now I have four children of my own...I have a son in Head Start. And Head Start has helped me to realize that you have to be involved in every aspect of your child's life, that you have to be involved even up to junior high and high school. So now that I've been going to Head Start, I go to my first grader's school. I sit in his classes and I know all the staff or most of the staff at his school. They know me and my child.

Head Start has not only helped me directly in the center but it's helped me outside. I've been able to grow. Being a part of the parent policy council has really enriched my life. Now, I am going to college and I'm seeking a higher education and a better way of life for my children...We have a wonderful staff. We have like a family and we're always helping one another and enriching one another's life...just being able to come together and have someone share information. The STEP Program, the Parent Policy Council, the Center meetings, anyway that you're involved with other members of Head Start, really helps you to grow...really enriches your life. And it's really enriched mine.

Parent 2

Head Start has been a benefit as well as an asset to me. I'm a first-year parent in the Head Start program. First of all, I couldn't pay for the services that Head Start has provided for me and my child. Head Start has given to my child, in the social area, it has increased his self-awareness, his self-esteem and he has become more highly motivated. Just the other day he came home and told me something that they had learned at the library and I was just amazed. I'm a firm believer in the mind is a terrible thing to waste...and Head Start has brought this out in my son. It has also taught him a sense of security...of belonging. He is no longer so self-centered. This has helped me as a parent, as a mother. We've learned to share more as a result of him being in Head Start.

In my child's center...I'm able to go around in the classroom and actually see what they have done for the day and what they're doing for the week or what they will be doing for the following month. I can go home and look at the information that my son has brought back home and I sit down and work with him...and go over this information with him and see that he actually is learning something by taking part in the tangible things. Dental services are provided for the kids and medical services are provided. And our motto is that "once you feed a child and make him well, that he can be educated and taught to think." You can't teach a child that's hungry and a child that's sick.

In the expansion area, I believe there is a need to expand the program to cover more hours for working parents. For example, in the summer, parents are still at work while their children are at home. They're under the services of a sibling or a neighbor. I think that there needs to be a program that will work in conjunction with the regular school program. As I said again, I still couldn't pay for the services that Head Start has provided for me. I do see a need within the next 20 years, as a matter of fact I see two needs. First of all, there should be an increase in teacher salary and teacher aide salary, that should be compatible with the public school system. We just don't know how many hours they put into the time with our children. Like me, many of us here today, have gone out and visited the centers and can see our children's work and can tell these teachers, pat them on the back and tell them that we thank them...that we appreciate them for actually helping our children. We should pay our teachers and our teacher assistants for they will not know that we appreciate the work they do.

I also feel that we should expand or increase the services for our children. For example, in our County, we serve 450 children in our program. There's a waiting list, I'm told, of 200. Now, we as parents know that the years 3, 4 and 5 are the most formative, as well as the most impressive years of our child's life. My point is panel that we need to have multiple years of service for our children instead of just one year. Our children cannot learn the information that they need in just one year. They're not guaranteed a place in the program for the next year.

Parent 3

I'm from a reservation in south Arizona...my daughter will be eight and she's in the first grade, she started out in Head Start during her third and fourth year. She has really grown and

it has really helped her learn a lot, giving her an education, maturity, self-esteem and that has helped me also to grow with her.

My second child did not attend Head Start which I regret. My third child is enrolled in Head Start at this time...I thank Head Start for what it's done but within the year I would like to see other things...our school buildings are really falling apart. Right now our center is fighting to have a center put up. We're halfway to winning...So our center should have a module by January when our children go back to school. It all started from the parents helping out and fighting for something.

Parent 4

In Head Start, I was the shy type...but Head Start has brought me out of my shell. We need more staff to pull parents out. I'm the chairperson of our local and I'm also on the Policy Committee. We have a team parenting program, I'm a facilitator. So, Head Start had made me grow. They did a perfect job with my children. I have three children but one of them was really angry so they got some of the anger out of him. They brought people in that can help him express his feelings, to separate them from mad to sad, to angry so he wouldn't lash out at other children. I can see the program going even 20 or more because like the other lady said, "I was a Head Start child" and sometime I can go through the building and smell the food, or smell some painting and it will bring me back to when I was that age.

What I would like to see in the future, we have the problem where children have to turn 3 during September and if they don't turn three we can't accept them into the program...and we already have the mandatory work program...so we were wondering if possible if we could still open this up to three year olds.

Parent 5

I'm a former parent. I have four sons. I was a teen parent and then I kept having children, so I was a middle-aged parent. Now at 39, almost 40 years old, I have my five year old as my first Head Start child and I see the big difference. That boy is socially oriented and he was kindergarten ready. My other children were involved in pre-school church programs and I have one that was even involved in the University program and he was not ready for kindergarten. He wasn't ready for school.

I learned that I just can't be sitting back in my corner educating my children...I have to be concerned about my community. I'm going to have to go out and share it and run for school board and run for Congressman and try to make a difference in my community. I have gained the self-esteem that I did not have being an abused woman seven years ago, and just going to work and coming home and being a welfare mother. The welfare department didn't give me any self-esteem, they took the little bit that I had left when I left my husband and just threw it in the trash can. When I started Head Start last year, I was not too good. I didn't have a refrigerator, I didn't have much furniture and this was five years after I left a man with two bags walking. Today I have a house full of furniture because of Head Start. When I told them that I didn't have furniture and I didn't have a refrigerator, my social service aide got me a refrigerator and furniture in three days.

Parent 6

I have four sons and I have one son that's in the Navy. And I have three smaller boys. But when I first started out at Head Start, first of all I thought it was something that you just send the children to. So after I got there, they said well o.k. we're going to make you parent president. And I said no don't make me parent president because I'm too busy. I have other things to do. And they made me parent president. After that I got involved with Head Start. They started sending me to workshops. And after that, I mean they had me going. I started singing Head Start. I started preaching Head Start. And I would get on the radio and talk Head Start. Because Head Start has given me a start and through all of this, I have gone back to school and I decided that I'm going to work with the children. I'm going to teach them all I know because I have something to give. Head Start has given me a brand new life. And I want to give the students a brand new life. Anytime you see me I have a smile on my face because Head Start has given me this new look on life. You know I wear all these different colors and they say why do you wear that? Hey, I'm a Head Start parent. I feel good about myself. I feel good, I look good and I smell good.

Parent 7

First of all, I want to show everyone my Head Start baby...she's one of the 10% handicapped children and she's really a great kid. Head Start has really done a lot for my family. You hear all these Cinderella stories, well I feel like

Cinderella too and Head Start's my fairy godmother. Anyway, Amanda started off with a speech problem and Head Start found out it wasn't just a speech problem, it was a hearing problem. We couldn't afford the hearing aides, they were $1,000. Well, Head Start came up with the hearing aides and they even came up with the $80 for the insurance too.

For myself, I was overweight. I was abused. Head Start gave me the control that I needed over my life to take control and do what I needed to do. I'm a single parent now, I wasn't when I started out. I'm really happy with myself. I've got a lot of self-esteem and I probably couldn't have come up here a couple of years ago and talk to you.

I'd like to see some kind of workshop made up where the staff and the parents can get together and learn to communicate better with one another. I really like the staff. It's not like I have anything against them because they've been really great...but maybe if we had some kind of workshops, it would help a little bit.

Parent 8

Well, I'm a nervous wreck. I just signed up today and I really didn't know anything about this. So I'll probably get emotional because I'm very emotional about Head Start. I was brought up in a dysfunctional home. I gave birth to a daughter at the age of 16. I dropped out of high school. Finally, at age 28, I reluctantly married. My husband was also brought up in the dysfunctional home. During the major part of our 10-year marriage, he was an active alcoholic. But we had four children and we were doing the best we could but we just didn't have any tools. Our children were growing up in this dysfunctional home until a year and a half ago when we moved...and my two oldest sons, I have four sons, were having a lot of trouble in school. They recommended that maybe I try to get my son into Head Start. So I did. And our lives began to change.

We're still in the process of change but I began to volunteer in the classroom. We have a program called Parent Power...twice a month the teachers come out to the homes and teach. It made such a difference. I got so I felt comfortable coming out of the home and going and volunteering in the classroom. I got to be friends with the teacher and I started to just feel a little better about myself. They also referred us to some agencies and starting helping my husband with his drinking and our child rearing problems.

I began to get some of the help that I desperately needed and especially for myself, my husband and my two oldest sons. My husband stopped drinking. I'd been isolated in the house just for years, I just didn't go anywhere. I didn't have any friends, I just didn't do anything with kids. I always felt worthless, I'd always felt like a nobody. I had very few successful experiences in my life and I love my children and wanted to do the best for them, but I didn't know how. In Head Start and through my friendship with the teachers and their help, and their referrals, through their support my whole family began to change. I see a really marked difference in my two younger sons, even while they are as young as they are. One of them will be three and one of them just turned four. I'm working with my oldest sons and for the first time I feel like I might have a chance of successfully turning around some of the self image problems that they've had growing up in our home.

Just a couple of real quick examples. I see such a difference...I remember when I was teaching my older son to ride a bike. We would run along behind him and he'd look back and he'd look down and it took us forever. He was seven years old before he finally learned how to ride a bike. My younger son was three and a half this spring. And he said, "Mom take the training wheels off my bike. I want to ride it." I said, "I don't think that you're big enough to ride a bike." He said, "well, I think I am and if you just take those training wheels off, I'll show you." We took them off and he just got on the bike and rode it down the sidewalk at three and a half. My nine year old, if he can't find a shoe, he'll stay inside all day because he doesn't have any shoes. Well, my two year old is going to be three in December, he'll go and find two shoes, they may not match, they may be on the wrong feet, the coat's on upside down, he's got a mitten and a glove, but he goes out the door to play in the sand, because he's a Head Start kid and he says, I'm going to solve this problem. It's a miracle to me.

Parent 9

I didn't think I could do this. Head Start has given me a lot of confidence. I have two daughters who have gone through Head Start. First, I'd like to thank God. And I'd like to thank L.B. Johnson for creating Head Start for us.

Head Start has helped me, has helped my children in so many ways. My children socially have had a chance to interact with other children from all cultures. They enjoy the environment in the Head Start program and the Head Start classes. I think they are run very well. The health care benefits that come with the package of the Head Start program are great...The well-balanced

foods that they get are good for children, especially those who don't get it at home.

For me, it has opened me up and built my confidence. The parent coordinator at my center got me involved. I'm the chairperson for the Parent Policy Council. Also, I like this program because it gives the parents control. They don't tell you what to do, you kind of at least have the opportunity to tell them what you like and what you want them to do. You don't get that in any other program besides Head Start.

Parent 10

I am a mother of five. So far, I've had three children in the program in four and a half years. I feel like my children are far more capable socially. I have one child who entered the school system who was not in the Head Start program because I had left my husband and was not there in time to get him in for that year because they were too full. And that is the only child that has major problems of my five children. I noticed my younger children especially have a lot more self confidence. What I've gotten out of the program is that I come from an abuse situation and I was able to be a part of the adult world again. I also have a lot more confidence in myself and I feel like I am more capable and that I can have opinions and that's o.k.

We have a really neat staff and I don't know about other programs but the communication between our staff and the parents is fantastic. The thing I really like about the program that...I hope will never change is the fact that the parents can and need to be involved which is not available in very many other programs of any sort...The things that I think could be changed or added would be expansion to a large area...we have a whole bunch of the state that's never even heard of Head Start. So we could use a lot more exposure and it would be neat if nationwide, maybe for the states that are so scarcely populated, if there were more Head Start exposure.

Parent 11

I wanted to thank you just for the opportunity and express to you how Head Start has helped me. One of the things that I need to mention and I think it's real important, is the fact that as a single parent male one of the things...that I learned in my Head Start experiences is how to care for my three children. My daughter is 12, and I have two boys who are eight and six. Where

could I have learned to be as caring, loving and sensitive and learn how to parent but from other expert parents who are in the same thing?

When I first heard about Head Start I was going through a divorce and I was not able to even speak to people. In fact I went through about a six-month depression and I didn't even leave the home. One day I was in the park and I saw these children with a Head Start tee-shirt on and I'd never heard of Head Start. So I asked what Head Start was and they told me. I realized that the classroom site was at the end of my block and I didn't even know that. So the problem I see is recruitment. My children were in private school. My youngest was able to go to Head Start. Within a matter of a month, I was the classroom chairperson and then I went to the council.

But some of the things that I wanted to address is that with parents coming into Head Start, they are low income not by choice but by circumstances. I think the voice that needs to go out in the community, to the local school boards, is that even though we are in this low-income bracket, that doesn't mean that we're non-educated, when we speak, we are intelligent.

Head Start has given people like myself a security blanket. And sometimes it's tough to let go. Because all through our life we experience loss. But one of the things that I see that we need is to help these people grow but let them go on their own too. They're not to be covered with a security blanket...I'd like to see more interactions with the PTA, Head Start working together, so that public schools aren't too intimidated by Head Start experts coming in.

The greatest gift I received from Head Start is the gift of life for me, that I knew I could grow. I worked in my community, I started a support group in my church for separated and divorced. I started in the public schools, I'm on the school council of the bilingual advisory committee, and at Head Start I'm the chairperson, I'm on every council, every committee. But it has taught me to be a parent and that's the greatest gift that I can give back. I'm not the best, but I'm working on it.

Parent 12

I'm a past parent because my son that was in the program is seven years old. He's in the second grade but Head Start helped us find that he had a speech problem and he did occupational therapy and I'm happy to say that I have just been informed the end of November that this will be the last year that Mike will

need the speech and occupational therapy because it was caught so early.

I would like to see better publicity to help educate the public especially the public school system. When my son went into kindergarten, his teacher had never heard of Head Start. So I had to educate the kindergarten teachers in our town about Head Start. I'm now on the school improvement council there and helping to educate all the teachers. I would like to see more multi-services available...there are so many multi-cultural families in the programs across the country. In our program right now we are having a hard time trying to find services for Vietnamese families and so I would like to see a lot more programs.

Parent 13

You're looking at a very happy parent. One of a drop in the ocean-filled of parents who are here sharing their experiences...what I wanted to bring up was that sometime in the future, can we get this new bill passed for the full-day care system because that's another way that my children were lost in the system of things...We need that twelve-month program. And another point is that we could benefit from a course on financial assistance...

Parent 14

My oldest child is in the home-based Head Start. It's come to my understanding that not all states have the home-based program and I think it's a really good program and I think that other states should have it too. Like I said, my oldest is in Head Start so I have two more at home. I cannot afford the babysitting and while I would further my education, I think it would be a good idea if Head Start could help out with the daycare for us who want to get out of our low income situation.

I would like to see more information given to the parents before their children are in Head Start so that we can prepare them...I would like to see some program for the three year olds.

Parent 15

Everyone has basically said what all of us feel. But what wasn't said that I personally would like to say for myself is that as a child I was a leader. I had leadership ability. As an adult I had leadership ability. But not until I got involved with Head Start did I gain leadership skills. Leadership skills are very important because you can have the ability, but if you can't apply your skills, then you haven't done anything. Head Start has given me that opportunity.

I want to enlighten the parents in our region that you don't have to continue with the stigma that low income means low intelligence. Because a child has reacted to a typical five-year old behavior, you don't have to say that he's a bad child. Head Start has educated us where I have taken the word bad out of my vocabulary. I just wanted to say that I could go on and on because I love to speak. But I am going to be quiet and I would just like to say that I love everyone here. We come out here and we support our children and that's what we're all about and we should introduce ourselves to each other. We're all here for the same reason, we all share the same common goal and that's the love of our children.

Parent 16

My concern is that Head Start begin to train and address the children that are coming into our system who are drug exposed. From my personal experience, I have adopted two children. I work with the foster care system. In our county they have developed a program that works with three to six-year olds and helps them transition into the school district. My child left Head Start with a positive, self-esteem and attitude. He is a child who is very intelligent but has problems from being exposed to drugs. The support is not there in the schools the way that it is with the Head Start program...in our County, there were 2,363 children born who were exposed to drugs. Those are going to be coming into the Head Start program. They're going to be coming into the public school system and there's a lot of training that can help the teachers and educate us as parents when you're dealing with a child who's handicapped by the exposure to the drugs.

Parent 17

I first want to discuss the achievements that our policy council has done, and the way that we network our program. In

1988, we rallied our city hall to get a pension for our staff and our staff received the pension. We established a newsletter to network the parents in the city to be informed on what we're trying to do for the Head Start family. We developed a program called MORE (Mothers On the Road to Employment) to help people with the welfare reform bill and got different corporations to start looking at the abilities that the Head Start parents have. Head Start is the only program that helps the entire family remain strong and Head Start is the foundation to help the family reach their goal...we need to strengthen the parent education piece...

Personally, Head Start has helped me grow. I'm a single parent and I have three children. Due to the problems of being abused and a situation that was beyond my control, the social service component has helped me and my family. Now, I'm in college trying to get my degree in human services so I can also give back what Head Start has given me. Two children I have graduated from Head Start. My daughter's in the second grade and she's reading above her level...Head Start has also given me the strength and the ability to believe in myself and also to give my children the same pride that they need to have in themselves. And I would really like to thank you all for coming up with this program and I think that you need to really go out more personally with the social service component, because there's a lot of parents who are single, who need somebody who really cares about them, to really help them become better parents for their kids.

Parent 18

My child was four years old, and he had a lot of seemingly emotional problems. He would do very strange things that we didn't understand. All kids run from the classroom at times but he would just all of a sudden run from a classroom. He wouldn't interact as a normal child probably would and they brought in a psychologist to observe him. I just appreciate the things that they did in helping me to understand Jonathan and all his moods and all his ways. I also learned from Head Start that Jonathan had a way of manipulating me that I didn't know about and so I had to learn how to deal with that.

They also took time to let me know Jonathan was a very sensitive child and he had some speech problems and some other problems. Jonathan now is in kindergarten in the public school and he's doing very well and he has adjusted quite well from being in Head Start two years. Also, it has helped us as a family to know, me particularly, to know as a mother how to deal with my children. To be able to look past Jonathan's actions,

his tantrums or whatever, to see exactly what's causing it. We as parents want to discipline our kids in certain ways that may not be appropriate all the time and may not even be the answer. So I've learned a lot of different ways of disciplining my child, to understand my child better.

My husband has gained a great success with the Head Start program. They had a session for husbands or fathers where he learned how to better hold his son and hug his son and kiss his son without feeling like this was a bad thing to do. I just thank God for that. There is a better interaction with my husband and my children now that he is able to feel comfortable with playing with our boys...it's o.k. to hug and kiss your sons the way mothers do automatically.

The parent policy council has given me a lot of growth...I learned through...the council as well as in the classes, that I must be a fulfilled parent, fulfilled within myself and understand what it is that children go through so I can better raise my child. If I'm not fulfilled, then I may take a lot out on my child. They taught me how to make myself happy along with making my child happy.

Parent 19

I feel that we need more training classes on how to raise children when it comes to the young people. A lot of them don't know the first step about raising children, there are babies having babies...I wish it was possible to have parent counseling or more and better referrals for parents who have problems. When it comes to a lot of the young parents, they have a lot of personal problems. They have no one to go to, they don't even know the first step of how to deal with it or handle it...we need more information on budgeting food in the home...I know off hand there are young parents that take their children to school and sometimes that's the only meal they get especially from the 15th to the 30th of the month since a lot of them are on budget incomes.

Parent 20

I'd just like to say it's a real pleasure to be here. One of the suggestions that I'd like to make is in the area of social services. Our school has 380 children and we only have one social service director and it's virtually impossible for one person to keep up with the parents of 380 children. I think

there needs to be some kind of program where depending on the number of children at that particular school, you need to have only so many children for each social service director. If it's over a certain amount of children, then that social service director should have an assistant. Also as far as fathers, I'm glad to see a father on the board as a parent. It's nice to see and I think there should be more programs...for fathers.

Parent 21

I have two children, they're both boys. My youngest son was born with lots of problems and luckily with Head Start, I found out that he had a speech problem. They noticed it. They got him going with speech therapy and he got into the public school and Head Start had to make several calls to get the speech therapy going in the public school. They also went with me to find a school for my child. My older child was just fine for Head Start. Now we're having problems with him in the public schools. And Head Start is helping me find ways to make him better in the public schools.

Our county welfare has totally changed. If you're a single mother, or anything, you have to start going to school when your child is three. Or, you have to go out and get a job. And we have parents that have three year olds that can't have the home-base services and we're trying to fit our three year olds into the centers because the parents aren't going to be there and they have no one to watch these children. And I'd like to see...where we could...help the parents out more because the demands of welfare are completely changing. Those children might be left in the home with no one to watch them. And that's a scary thought.

Parent 22

I think that Head Start should reach out more to the foster parents. There are parents out there that are high income, yet their children are low-income. They get money from the county or federal grants. They don't know that this Head Start is out there for these children and they really need it. They might only be in the Head Start program for a few months before they're re-unified with their parents, but that few months could make a great head start for them. God knows what they will go back to when they go back home...I've talked to social workers to try and encourage the foster parents...

Parent 23

It's a pleasure to be here. One of the reasons why it's a pleasure, you mothers have big shoes to fill. I am a single parent (father). Mother's Day comes around and to me it's being mother and father. It is just double the pleasure. Thank you Head Start.

The one suggestion that I would like to add to the committee is that being a parent I have learned that perhaps the parents that are involved with Head Start can continue by teaching children that are having babies. I think if you have a child that perhaps is 15, 16, 17, you can continue the education that you have picked up from Head Start and pass it on to the 17 year old to develop in parenting. I have learned it therefore I'm willing to share it. But where do I go? How do I get a child that's 16, 17 -- how do I tell him, look this is how you take care of a baby, this is how you hold him, how do I tell this to a young girl. This is how you take care of your baby. Forget the boys. You young men, forget the girls. This is what you've got to worry about. How do you do that?

Parent 24

What I have to say, I cannot limit it in three minutes. I'll only just brush on what Head Start has done for me. I was noticing all the young mothers talking about they're middle aged at 39, at 38 I had my last son which was in Head Start. It was just like being reborn because I had three other kids that I learned to be a parent on trial and error through a lot of mistakes. But not until I got involved with Head Start, did I learn the proper way to be a parent.

Before Head Start I wouldn't even dare attempt to stand here and look at you and talk to you just for a brief moment. But they taught me, the workshops and everything that they offered...And I thank Head Start for giving me that push because I found out about going back to school. I had potential. I learned to write and I did some writing. I'm working now; I'm doing CDA and still going to school. I don't give up. You never get too old to learn. I learned how to be parents to my second kid better than I did the first one. My older kids say, you didn't do a good job with us like you did my son. Well, I said I didn't have Head Start then. I didn't know it existed. So Head Start is in my bloodstream and I cannot shake it out.

Parent 25

Good afternoon. I'm going to be very brief and quick. Everybody has a Head Start story to say and a very successful one. Of course, my God has been my motto and he gave me a beautiful family. My mother immediately adopted me and soon began to feed me all the nutritional things that I needed. She explained the role that I had as a person, pulled me from under a rock. With loving care she spoke the beauty of understanding and accepting all things. She said that everything had a reason for being. I never met anybody who could accept me and all my faults. My mother would always pick me up when I fell down and then I looked around and said, is my adopted mother here, yes, of course, it's Head Start.

NOTE: These stories have been edited for clarity and abbreviated to capture key points.